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Tao Qian, the idea of garden as home, and the Utopian vision

Zhang Longxi[1]

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Abstract Tao Qian or Tao Yuanming (365–427), one of the greatest poets in classical Chinese literature, has traditionally been regarded as "the paragon of hermit poets" for withdrawing himself from a minor office to be close to nature as a farmer, and for writing about his life in the country, about home-coming to his own garden, and about an imaginary ideal society in the "Peach Blossom Spring." How do we understand Tao Qian and his poetry in the context of the Chinese literary tradition in general and of his own time—the Wei-Jin period—in particular? What is the significance of his idea of garden as home? And how does his work give expression to a Chinese vision of an ideal society? This essay will try to explore these questions and argue for the perennial appeal of the Utopian vision in China and beyond.

Keywords Tao Qian · The Peach-Blossom Spring · Garden · Home · Utopia · The collective and the individual

First published in 1516 and soon to celebrate its 500th anniversary, Thomas More's *Utopia* set the paradigmatic example of utopian literature in the West, presenting an archetype of an ideal society of human beings living together in a peaceful and harmonious community without the divine aid of God's grace. In the eighteenth century, as Krishan Kumar observes, French enlightenment philosophers, with the exception of Rousseau and perhaps Diderot, "were generally sceptical and hostile towards utopian forms and schemes. There is no entry for *utopie* in the *Encyclopédie*, and Voltaire confessed that he had never read More's *Utopia*."[1]

[1] Kumar (1987, p. 38).

✉ Zhang Longxi
ctlxzh@cityu.edu.hk

[1] City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong



The Enlightenment philosophers were perhaps more engaged in figuring out the way to build a good society based on practical reason rather than on what they thought to be empty utopian dreams. Indeed, Voltaire was not only skeptical towards utopian schemes, but he marshaled all his satirical strengths in his brilliant philosophical novel *Candide* to attack Leibniz's idea that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. First published in 1759, *Candide* nonetheless engages with the utopian idea in its depiction of Eldorado, a secluded place unexpectedly discovered by the protagonist through a narrow passage, which is a generic convention of almost all utopian narratives. Furthermore, the worldly values are completely reversed in Eldorado as gold and precious stones are treated literally like dirt without any value, which is another conventional feature of utopian fiction. Voltaire's Candide, however, does not want to stay in Eldorado and finally turns away from it as an impossible fantasy dreamland towards a more down-to-earth and manageable idea of a garden as home, as Candide famously announced at the very end of the novel: "*mais il faut cultiver notre jardin* (but we must go to attend our garden)."[2]

As Douwe Fokkema comments in his study of utopian fiction, the last chapter of *Candide* "leads away from Leibnitzian abstractions about the best of all possible worlds to focus instead on the practical problems of here and now."[3] That is to say, garden is a place at home for a person who has gone through so much suffering and misfortune to retreat to, a personal and private place as distinct from utopia as a communal and public realm. And yet, isn't an idyllic garden with its natural beauty cultivated by human design and labor also utopian? Does not garden as a privately cultivated environment embody the human desire and vision of an ideal living condition? Thus we find the two themes closely related despite their apparent difference—the utopian vision of an ideal society and garden as an idyllic ideal living environment. These two themes articulated separately by More and Voltaire in the European tradition can be found in the works of a great Chinese poet and writer Tao Qian 陶潛 or Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–427) more than a thousand years before Thomas More and more than a thousand and three hundred years before Voltaire. In the long history of Chinese literature, Tao Qian has the distinction of writing the best known utopian text, *Tao hua yuan ji* 桃花源記 or "The Record of the Peach Blossoms Spring," as well as being "the paragon of all hermit poets, past and present,"[4] anticipating a whole tradition of literary writings about retiring to cultivate one's own land and garden.

Tao Qian lived in the Wei-Jin period of the late fourth and the early fifth century, a time when Confucian orthodoxy set up during the Han dynasty had declined after four hundred years of ideological dominance, while Daoism with its naturalistic philosophy and mysticism became more influential on the intellectual scene. In many ways, Tao Qian was ahead of his time, as he wrote poetry in a plain language and a simple style quite different from the ornate style his contemporaries favored and valued, but it became greatly influential on classical Chinese poetry centuries later. His moral character, much admired by his contemporaries as well as the later

2 Voltaire (1979, p. 233).

3 Fokkema (2011, p. 108).

4 Zhong (1981, 1:13).

generations, was further strengthened by his philosophical convictions. After serving in a minor office for a short period of time, Tao Qian quit to live as a recluse and farmer, and his poetry immortalized a farmer's life in the garden and the fields with all its labor and simple joy, quietude and undisturbed solitude, and always with a bottle of wine in a beautiful natural setting.

As we know, Confucius never put much weight on farming or husbandry, and when his student Fan Xu asked him about growing crops and tending gardens, the Master was not pleased, but suggested that he might as well go to ask an old peasant or gardener. "What a petty fellow Fan Xu is!" says Confucius when the student has left. Once you have learned how to govern a state and be a good ruler, the Master continues, "people would come from all the four quarters, carrying their children on their backs. Who needs to talk about crops?"[5] Tao Qian, however, talks a great deal about crops in his writings. Another important figure, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–193 BCE), the great Han Confucian literati-official responsible for installing Confucianism as the state-sanctioned ideological orthodoxy, dedicated so much of his life to the study of ancient books that he, according to a biographical legend, kept himself in his study with curtains drawn on all sides and never stepped into his garden for three consecutive years. Tao Qian was acutely aware of such lofty figures and how his own life fell short of the expectations of a Confucian scholar as such exemplary figures encouraged one to achieve. In the last poem from a group entitled "Exhortation to Farmers," Tao Qian directly touched on the issue by mentioning Confucius, Fan Xu, and Dong Zhongshu, and talked about farming and about falling short of those great Confucian expectations. The tone of the poem, however, is rather interestingly ironic, as he writes:

孔耽道德	Confucius was obsessed with morality,
樊須是鄙	And thought Fan Xu petty and crude.
董樂琴書	Master Dong never stepped into his garden,
田園不履	For so much he loved music and books.
若能超然	If I could ever reach that loftiness
投跡高軌	And on their noble path leave my trace,
敢不斂衽	How could I not tidy myself up,
敬讚德美[6]	And for pure virtue sing their praise?

Surely Tao Qian implicitly identified himself with Fan Xu, someone who cared about crops and the art of gardening, and this becomes clear when we read the other and earlier poems in the same group, in which Tao Qian had already praised people living in antiquity as farmers and paid homage to ancient sage kings Houji 后稷, Shun 舜 and Yu 禹, who had all worked in the fields and taught people how to get food by farming. In the poem above, then, the apparent praise of the high Confucian virtues is expressed tongue in cheek, so to speak, for Tao Qian was, as the famous

[5] Liu (1954, p. 257).

[6] Wang (1957).

historian Chen Yinque argues, "Confucian outside but Daoist inside," a poet and thinker advocating a Daoist "new naturalism."[7] In another poem, Tao Qian also distanced himself from the high expectations of a Confucian scholar when he admitted that he could not reach the high ideal set up by Confucius, but would be content with the agrarian work he had decided to take on:

先師有遺訓	Our great teacher exhorted us to worry
憂道不憂貧	About the *dao*, not about being poor.
瞻望邈難逮	Looking up, I found it hard to reach,
轉欲志長勤[8]	So I turned to work long at my will.

What Chen Yinque called "naturalism" refers to the idea of *ziran* 自然 or nature, an important concept in the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. What is *ziran*, literally "self-so," is opposite to human behaviors and actions, which the Confucians advocated in terms of ethical etiquette and political institutions. From the Daoist point of view, these human behaviors and actions are nothing but artificial and harmful interventions, and in contrast to the Confucians, Daoist philosophers advocated *wuwei* 無為 or non-action in the sense that one should let things take their own course without interference, that is, let things develop according to their own nature and come naturally. What is inborn is natural, of its own nature, thus internal; but *ziran* also refers to *tian di* 天地 or heaven and earth, that is, nature as the external environment, not human constructed, but existing of and by itself, such as mountains, rivers, and everything in the universe. In chapter 25 of the *Laozi*, we find this well-known expression of such a Daoist naturalism: 人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然 "Man follows earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows the *dao*, and the *dao* follows its own course."[9] Following nature thus means both following the natural course of things, observing and admiring what nature offers in the garden and fields, and also following one's own nature, that is, one's natural disposition and desires. From this perspective, then, we may say that Tao Qian is above all other poets a poet of nature, because he best exemplifies such a naturalism in both senses as we have just defined, and this comes out clearly in his poetry as well as in his life. When he quit the minor office and returned to farm his land, he wrote "Five Poems on Returning to Dwell in My Field and Garden," of which the first one is particularly illuminating for what we have been discussing above:

少無適俗韻	In youth, nothing in me fit the common taste,
性本愛丘山	It's my nature to love mountains and hills.
誤落塵網中	By mischance I fell into the net of dust,
一去十三年	And was kept away for thirteen years.
羈鳥念舊林	A fastened bird would long for old woods,
池魚思故淵	A stranded fish would remember the deep pond.

7 Chen (1980, p. 205).

8 Wang (1957, p. 22).

9 Wang (226–249, p. 14).

開荒南野際	I've tilled some land at the edge of southern heath,
守拙歸園田	Keeping simplicity, I return to my home ground.
方宅十餘畝	Around my house are a couple of acres,
草屋八九間	And eight or nine rooms with thatched roof.
榆柳蔭後簷	Elms and willows shade the back eaves,
桃李羅堂前	And before the hall a peach and plum grove.
暧暧遠人村	Half-hidden is the village of secluded people,
依依墟里煙	From their houses a wispy smoke arises.
狗吠深巷中	A dog barks in the depth of a small lane,
雞鳴桑樹巔	On top of a mulberry tree a rooster cries.
戶庭無塵雜	No dust soils the pure air within my doors,
虛室有餘閒	In my bare rooms I find plenty of leisure.
久在樊籠裡	Too long I have been caged like a prisoner,
復得返自然[10]	Oh, at last, I now come back to nature.

In this poem, Tao Qian talks about his return to his garden and field as a correction of a momentary mistake. He made clear at the very beginning that it was his inborn "nature" (*xing* 性) to love mountains and hills, but "by mischance" he fell into "the net of dust," and was kept away for so many years. In the end, he was happy to "come back to nature" (*fan ziran* 返自然). Thus his return is both back to nature as external environment, to his garden as home, and also to his own nature that has always an inclination to love mountains and hills. There are two opposed views in the poem that create a tension between life in the garden as home and life confined to an official post. For the poet, life as an official was a mistake, caught in a "net of dust" like a "fastened bird," a "stranded fish," or "caged like a prisoner"; it was a life of bondage, against which life of a farmer in his own garden was not only natural, but was also setting him free. Tao Qian describes life in the country with images of an idyllic landscape—with thatch-roofed cottages, elm and willow trees, a peach and plum grove, "pure air" with no dust, and "bare rooms" with "plenty of leisure." Writing about farming and about life in the garden and the field becomes the most prominent feature of Tao Qian's work with a strong autobiographical component, and in that sense it is exemplary of what Alfred Hornung calls life writing. "As the task of life carried out after retirement from business," says Hornung, "this re-creative endeavor resembles the writing of an autobiography. The garden project is actually a performance of life writing, which leaves aside questions of hierarchy and stresses the combination of pleasant activities and leisure."[11] These words fit remarkably well with Tao Qian's life and his writing, or his life writing, and also what generations of readers have found valuable in his poetry and literary prose.

In the poem quoted above, the picture of a "village of secluded people" with "a wispy smoke" rising from their houses, where we hear a dog barking in a small lane

10 Wang (1957, p. 35).

11 Hornung (2013, p. 304).

and a rooster crying on top of a mulberry tree, strikes us as very similar to Tao Qian's depiction of the village in the Peach Blossoms Spring, the famous utopian image in classical Chinese literature. In both texts these are allusions to a famous passage from the *Laozi*, where the Daoist philosopher envisioned a primitive kind of rural utopia, a social vision in which "neighboring countries can see one another, and the crowing of roosters and the barking of dogs can be heard, but people would never associate with one another all their lives, even till death."[12] In Tao Qian's famous piece on the Peach Blossoms Spring, he describes how a fisherman discovered a hidden village through a narrow passage, which is typical of utopian narratives, just like Hythloday's discovery of Utopia in More's classic text, or the discovery of Eldorado in Voltaire's *Candide*. This fisherman was a native of Wuling, in modern day Changde of Hunan Province. While gliding down a stream that day, the fisherman suddenly came upon a stretch of peach trees in full bloom along the banks of the river on both sides, with many fragrant plants and a lush green strewn with the petals of fallen peach blossoms. The text goes on to tell us how the fisherman discovered an ancient society in peace and harmony, quite different from the world he knew and experienced as reality:

> Quite amazed, the fisherman rowed on, curious to find the end of this grove. It ended at the source of the river, and there he found a mountain with a small cave in front, from which some light seemed to come through. So he abandoned his boat and entered the opening. At first, the cave was so narrow that it allowed only one person to get through. Further down a few dozen steps, however, it suddenly opened up and led to an expanse of level land with rows and rows of houses. There were fertile farm fields, clear ponds, mulberry trees, bamboo groves and the like. Roads and thoroughfares crossed one another, and one could hear cocks crowing and dogs barking in the neighborhood. Men and women moving around or working in the fields all dressed the same way as people outside. The elderly and the young enjoyed themselves alike in leisure and contentment.[13]

Here we find many images that appear in the poem we quoted earlier—farm fields, clear ponds, mulberry trees, barking dogs and crowing cocks, which can all be traced to many other sources, of which a significant one is a passage from the *Laozi*, where the Daoist philosopher envisions his ideal social condition, where "neighboring countries can see one another, and the crowing of roosters and the barking of dogs can be heard, but people would never associate with one another all their lives, even till death."[14] The picture of small communities left alone to mind their own business and live in isolation embodies the Daoist notions of quietude and non-action, which must be understood as a vision in opposition to the Confucian ideas of human behavior and interaction in moral and political terms. Tao Qian's village of the Peach Blossoms Spring, however, is utopian in the sense that people living there have a sense of collective identity, with emphasis put on peaceful and harmonious

[12] Wang (226–249, p. 47).

[13] Ibid., pp. 92–93.

[14] Wang (226–249, Chap. 80, p. 47).

relationships rather than Laozi's completely ascetic and austere existence of isolated individuals. In Tao Qian's work, then, there is a healthy balance and combination of both Daoist and Confucian ideas, both the naturalistic ideal of the garden as home in a private space, and the peaceful and harmonious community as a collective. Such a balance, as we shall see, is important for a better understanding of utopia and its problems.

Tao Qian also wrote a *fu* 賦 or rhyme-prose, the famous *Gui qu lai xi ci* 歸去來兮辭 or "Oh, Let Me Go Home," in which he admitted again the mistake of taking an office as an enslavement, and announced his determination to go home, to return to his garden and field that had been laying wild and unattended:

歸去來兮	Oh, let me go home!
田園將蕪胡不歸	Why not go as my garden and field lay barren?
既自以心為形役	Since my heart has been enslaved by the body,
奚惆悵而獨悲	Why still feel sad and sullen?
悟以往之不諫	I realize that the past is beyond rescue,
知來者之可追	But the future is still possible to pursue;
實迷途其未遠	I've not lost my road too long, and feel
覺今是而昨非[15]	That yesterday was false, but today is true.

Then he described the joy of home-coming, how his family welcomed him back, and how he enjoyed living in his garden as home:

園日涉以成趣	In the garden I enjoy taking my daily walk,
門雖設而常關	And the gate, hardly needed, is often closed down.
策扶老以流憩	With a walking stick, I stroll and stop to rest,
時矯首而遐觀	Often with my head up, I leisurely look around.
雲無心以出岫	From mountain cliffs clouds come out at random,
鳥倦飛而知還	And now birds are tired and all home bound.
景翳翳以將入	The sunlight is dim and about to disappear;
撫孤松而盤桓[16]	Touching a solitary pine, I pace up and down.

Tao Qian wrote tenderly about farming and his friendship with other farmers: 農人告余以春及/將有事於西疇 "Farmers told me that spring is coming/And there will be work in the western fields." For the poet, farming or working in the fields was not just a physical action, but contained valuable insights for his mind. Growth and decay in nature led the poet to philosophical contemplations and glimpse into the mystery of life. He realized that life is short, and therefore the best to do is to follow one's own desires, not the temptations of wealth or immortality, and be satisfied with a way of life that comes naturally:

15 Wang (1957, pp. 135–136).

16 Ibid., p. 136.

木欣欣以向榮	Trees are all lush and green;
泉涓涓而始流	And streams flow and grow wide.
善萬物之得時	All ten thousand things have their time,
感吾生之行休	And I know there'll be the end of my life.
已矣乎	Well, so be it!
寓形宇內	How long in this universe
能復幾時	Can we have our body reside?
曷不委心任去留	Why not let our heart be the guide?
胡為乎遑遑欲何之	Why hurry to follow every empty tide?
富貴非吾願	Wealth is not my wish;
帝鄉不可期	Nor the immortal's abode for me to abide.
懷良辰以孤往	I walk alone in the lovely morning,
或植仗而耘耔	Or work in the fields, my stick put aside.
登東皋以舒嘯	Climb up the eastern hill to howl aloud,
臨清流而賦詩	Or compose a poem by the river's side.
聊乘化以歸盡	I follow the great transformation to the very end,
樂乎天命復奚疑[17]	Without hesitation, but with my fate content.

The idea of transformation refers to the change of things from one state to another, from life to death. All things have their moment of birth, growth, maturity, and also the moment of death and decay, and all form parts of the process of transformation. In following transformation to the end and being content with his fate, Tao Qian proves to be the poet of nature par excellence. In his writings, as already mentioned above, we find a rich combination of different ideas, on the one hand the Daoist idea of following the natural course of things and also one's own natural inclinations, and on the other the Confucian idea of an ideal community of people with a sense of collective identity and human relationships. In other words, we find both the utopian idea of a good society as Thomas More articulated and the individualistic idea of cultivating one's own garden as Voltaire expressed; and in Tao Qian, the two ideas are not opposed to one another, but they are seamlessly connected in his writing as they are in his life.

This is a rather important point because the problem with utopia, or the reason why in modern literature anti-utopia or dystopia becomes increasingly more popular than utopia per se, lies in the emphasis or overemphasis, in the utopian vision, on collective interests at the expense of individual choices, and on regimented social engineering at the expense of personal freedom. This is what we find in the great dystopian novels of the 20th century from Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, all of which describe a nightmarish totalitarian society as the reverse mirror image of utopia, the horror of the loss of individual freedom, the corruption of noble social ideals into repressive political realities. If utopia is meant to be an ideal society, a land of happiness, as I have argued elsewhere, "a fundamental question needs to be

[17] Ibid., p. 136.

asked: whose happiness? Is it that of each individual in an ideal society or that of the society as a whole? The question is central to all social ideals and has much to do with the degree of success—or failure—of particular utopias."[18] That is of course a very difficult question, for the balance between the collective and the individual, social vision and personal freedom, is extremely delicate and difficult to achieve. Modern dystopia has warned us how the collective utopian vision could be corrupted and turned into totalitarian or authoritarian nightmares, but we must also realize that extreme egotism, anarchism, and the rampant pursuit of self-interest in total neglect of a person's social and ethical responsibilities are equally destructive of the social fabric and the peace and justice of any society.

Looking at utopian fiction in China and the West, Fokkema finds something special about Chinese examples. "In all utopian writing there is a more or less explicit opposition between collective and individual bliss," says Fokkema, "except perhaps in Chinese utopias where, … the distinction between the collective and the individual appears to be expressed in less sharp tones."[19] This is certainly true of Tao Qian's writings, in which, as we have seen, a utopian vision and an image of individual bliss are not opposed to one another in a sharp contrast, but form parts of a complete and coherent ideal vision. In the Peach Blossom Spring, the rural, agrarian utopia runs like a self-sufficient communal system without a state machine:

相命肆農耕	Together they engage in farming the land,
日入從所憩	They start at sunrise, at sundown they stop.
桑竹垂餘蔭	Mulberries and bamboos offer cool shade,
菽稷隨時藝	They grow beans and grains in seasonal slots.
春蠶收長絲	In spring, silkworms produce long threads,
秋熟靡王稅[20]	And no king's tax levied on autumn crops.

It is noteworthy that villagers in the Peach Blossom Spring do not pay taxes to any king or government, which is quite remarkable for an early fifth-century poetic imagination. When the fisherman visited the village, people invited him to their homes, and each household treated him as a guest, but there was no official or magistrate organizing or overseeing the whole visit. It is quite imaginable that each household in the Peach Blossom Spring has its own garden and people live pretty much the way as they please. If Peach Blossom Spring is a utopia, it is much less regulated as a community than what we find in most utopian narratives in the West. Tao Qian's villagers told the fisherman that their ancestors had come to this place while trying to escape from the terrible oppression of Qin, the first Chinese dynasty with a notorious tyrant, and they knew they were "separated from the outside world"; so they "did not know there had been the Han dynasty, to say nothing of the Wei and the Jin." Finally, when the fisherman took leave, the villagers told him that what he had found in this place should be kept as a secret, "not worthy to let

[18] Zhang (2015, p. 117).

[19] Fokkema (2011, pp. 27–28).

[20] Wang (1957, p. 93).

outsiders know."[21] All these demonstrate that the villagers have a strong sense of belonging to their own community as distinct from the outside world, and that they form a society of their own. The Peach Blossom Spring articulates Tao Qian's own social vision, his utopian vision, and we may well imagine the poet himself wanting to live in such a beautiful village literally out of this world. In his real life, returning to live in his own garden and field was a more feasible, down-to-earth way of making that same vision a reality. As we read his poetry, we seem to see the poet living a simple and free life, working in the fields and relaxing in the garden as home, with all the pleasures nature offers, among flowers, particularly chrysanthemums, always with a flask of wine, and having a pleasant time with his family and friends. In Tao Qian, life and writing are mutually enriching in such a way that the two sides can hardly be separated, but are combined as a sort of autobiographical expression or life writing. That is indeed the image of Tao Qian as we find in numerous poems and paintings of later generations, immortalized not only in the Chinese tradition, but with a wide circulation in the literary and artistic traditions of East Asia as a whole.

Tao Qian's "Record of the Peach Blossom Spring" is a relatively simple and short text in comparison with Thomas More's *Utopia* and the many other utopian narratives in later times, and it does not speculate in any detail how the society is organized, how its various institutions are established, and how they operate and function. After all, Tao Qian's text predated More's *Utopia* by more than a millennium. And yet, the simple principle that runs through Tao Qian's life and expressed in so many of his poems and prose works, the principle of living one's life as in accordance with one's individual choice, of cultivating one's own garden as home, free from external interference or coercion, is probably more important for ethical and political philosophy than a sophisticated plan or blue print for an ideal society with intrusive rules, regulations, and protocols, which almost invariably tend to become repressive and unbearable when a utopian plan of social engineering becomes political reality. That may be an important lesson we may draw from Tao Qian's works, an important insight into the nature of things both in nature as the universe with all its marvelous beauty and immense power, and in human society as a way of living collectively in peace and harmony, in civilized co-existence.

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[21] Ibid., p. 93.

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